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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ABIDJAN 000723

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STATE FOR PRM/AFR/CACHANG AND WE/AF/RKAMINSKI
STATE PASS TO USAID/OFDA/DDEBERNARDO
DAKAR FOR USAID/OFDA/RDAVIS AND USAID/CHUGHES
BRUSSELS FOR MMEZNAR
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TAGS: [PREF PHUM](#) [PREL IV](#)

SUBJECT: UNHCR CLOSES TABOU TRANSIT CENTER

REF: A. ABIDJAN 318

[1](#)B. ABIDJAN 093

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: RefCoord traveled to Tabou, Cote d'Ivoire, on June 27-30 to meet with UNHCR officials regarding their repatriation efforts and the pending closure of the Tabou Transit Center (TC). RefCoord also traveled to several surrounding villages and met with refugee representatives. Although return movements from Cote d'Ivoire to Liberia have been minimal this year, UNHCR expects numbers to pick up in July and August for several reasons, including their decision to close the TC on June 30, efforts to integrate Liberian refugees into the Ivoirian school system, and the end of the harvest season in Cote d'Ivoire. UNHCR believes a large number of refugees will stay in Cote d'Ivoire and plans to focus its future activities on promoting local integration. RefCoord also visited Niplou, one of the villages attacked in January that led to internal displacement and is still largely abandoned. The closure of the TC represents an important, although not final, step in UNHCR's assistance activities in Cote d'Ivoire. End Summary.

[1](#)2. RefCoord met Mahamadou Toure, Head of Field Office for UNHCR Tabou, on June 28 to discuss UNHCR's ongoing return activities as well as the pending closure of the Transit Center (TC) in Tabou for Liberian refugees. Toure told RefCoord the TC would close on June 30 and that UNHCR had already transferred approximately 900 refugees to Tabou town and to some of the surrounding villages (Note: local papers announced the closing on July 3. End note). He said they had begun to dismantle unsafe structures in the TC as people moved out. Although UNHCR had stopped general food distribution to refugees, they did provide three months ration to any refugee who agreed to leave the TC and they will provide general services to vulnerable groups to the end of the year. Toure said Liberian refugee children will have to enroll in Ivoirian schools in the fall and that Liberian refugees will have to participate in the local health system as of January 1, 2007. RefCoord also met with representatives of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) but was not able to visit PRM-funded project sites due to heavy flooding and poor road conditions.

RETURN FIGURES FROM COTE D'IVOIRE

[1](#)3. UNHCR's figures show that a total of 15,396 refugees have returned to Liberia from Cote d'Ivoire since November 2004, with most returns occurring last year (13,498). So far, only about 1,800 Liberians have returned from Cote d'Ivoire in

¶2006. There are only two UNHCR-managed camps in Cote d'Ivoire, in Guiglo (approximately 7,000 refugees) and the now closed TC in Tabou (approximately 2,400 refugees). The rest of the Liberian refugees (approximately 30,000) are integrated in local villages in the western region known as the refugee welcome zone (ZAR).

¶4. Toure said about 9,000 of all returns from Cote d'Ivoire have come from the Tabou region. However, the most recent convoy on June 27 carried only 91 persons, the highest figure since April 7. Still, in 2005 the majority of returns occurred in July and August. Toure believes a similar pattern might emerge in 2006 for three reasons. First, Toure believes UNHCR's decision to close the TC and to end general food distribution will send a strong signal to many refugees that it is time to return. In addition, the harvest season has just ended and many refugees will receive their salary payments from local plantations in early July. Finally, Toure explained that UNHCR will not offer separate education classes for Liberian children when the school year starts again in the fall. Instead, they will be integrated in the local Ivoirian school system. Thus, many parents will want to return so their children can enroll in the Liberian system.

THE TABOU TWISTER

¶5. RefCoord visited the TC with Toure on June 29. We expected to see some dismantled accommodations and a large number of residents still waiting to be transferred, but the TC looked instead like a tornado had run through the middle of it. Most structures were completely flattened and bits of lumber lay scattered throughout the compound. Some structures had obviously burned to the ground, but the ashes and cinders were cleaned and removed. Throughout the TC

ABIDJAN 00000723 002 OF 003

refugees were taking apart remaining buildings and bundling up the wood to bring with them to the villages or to Tabou where they would now take up residence. RefCoord also visited the UNHCR center for vulnerable groups (ENA). Toure stated they had identified approximately 170 vulnerables who would be provided with food and full health services to the end of the year. A local UNHCR field officer said already about half of those in the ENA had decided to leave the center and had moved to Tabou with friends of family members as conditions in the ENA were definitely a step down from the TC.

ROUND TABLE WITH REFUGEE REPRESENTATIVES

¶6. RefCoord met with refugee community representatives to discuss the ongoing repatriation process. Several representatives explained that they did not agree with the manner in which UNHCR was closing the TC and that many refugees needed continued assistance. RefCoord told the representatives that the closure of the TC was part of UNHCR's repatriation process and had already been announced to refugees. RefCoord mentioned that on two previous visits to the TC in October 2005 and in March 2006 he had informed refugees that donors were moving financial resources to help rebuild Liberia and that they would find fewer resources going outside that country. Several refugees spoke about security concerns in Liberia. When pressed for examples they referred to a weak Liberian judicial system and the fact that they had heard the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia had a curfew for diplomatic personnel. One refugee admitted that his wife had already returned to Liberia. A couple of refugees voiced concern that locals in Tabou might blame Liberians for any problems that might occur now that a large number of them had moved into town. Separately, Toure informed RefCoord that the Deputy Chairman of the Refugee Committee had decided to return to Liberia on the previous day's convoy after UNHCR started dismantling the TC.

VISIT TO LOCAL VILLAGES

¶7. RefCoord visited the villages of Oudjire, Mane, and Niplou on June 28. Approximately 170 Liberian refugees live in Oudjire and 260 in Mane. The Liberians in Niplou live in a small settlement of about 50 persons just outside the village. There are many similar settlements in the area where the Liberians have access to jobs on local plantations. In most cases Liberian refugees in these villages live among Ivoirians of similar ethnic background. The refugees did not appear to be in any hurry to return to Liberia and the locals did not appear anxious to have them leave. Instead, refugees asked questions about the level of assistance they could expect if they remained in Cote d'Ivoire as opposed to assistance that would be available if they returned to Liberia. None of the Liberians RefCoord spoke to in these three villages said they would not return to Liberia under any circumstances.

NIPLOU ABANDONED

¶8. Niplou was among several villages attacked in January over land-tenure disputes that resulted in several deaths and hundreds of internally displaced (ref. A). Tucked deep in the forest, Niplou is still largely abandoned although the presence of a small contingent of Ivoirian gendarmes in the village has encouraged a few inhabitants to return. Both UNHCR and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) reported the pre-January population in Niplou was between 200-250 persons. IRC reported that approximately 180 persons were displaced to Mane and that some 120 of those were children. During RefCoord's visit to Mane, however, the village representatives could only say there were "many" people from Niplou in their village.

¶9. The attacks were apparently perpetrated by ethnic Lobi attempting to reclaim their plantations after a seven-year exile for their responsibility in the death of a local Kru member. Still, no one could say for sure who led the attacks. Toure said the local Prefect had informed him that the leader of the attack was probably an Ivoirian, but this still does not fully answer the questions surrounding final responsibility. Interestingly, the Liberians RefCoord met just outside Niplou seemed completely unconcerned by their

ABIDJAN 00000723 003 OF 003

proximity to the village despite the fact that some Liberians had fled at the time of the attacks. Toure confirmed that Liberians have not been targeted because they do not actually own any of the plantations in dispute.

COMMENT

¶10. UNHCR's closure of the TC in Tabou marks an important milestone in their assistance activities in Cote d'Ivoire. At the same time, real challenges still remain. Some refugees do have shelter concerns and relations between locals in Tabou and the refugees need to be handled with sensitivity. Also, poor road conditions in Liberia between Harper and the surrounding villages have already delayed the return of one group of 25 refugees who just left the TC. For those refugees who remain in Cote d'Ivoire, issues of schooling and potential labor exploitation of children will remain high on the list of concerns for UNHCR and NGOs in the region. In the meantime, returns from Cote d'Ivoire are likely to be mixed. Cote d'Ivoire still has more to offer Liberian refugees in terms of economic opportunity and basic services than their places of origin in Liberia, and work on local plantations in the Tabou region is readily available. In fact, many refugees who had returned to Liberia have already come back to Cote d'Ivoire, as non-refugees, because of the availability of jobs and basic services. Still, the fact that many of the refugees seem to be weighing the decision to

return or stay on the basis of available levels of assistance shows that security concerns in Liberia are beginning to take a back seat to concerns over their own economic well-being.

Hooks